

A writer's pen, a philosopher's eye

TUE MAY 2 1989
Bill Eaton's prose was always laced with wit and wisdom

By Bill Snyder
The Tribune

Whether he or she is faced with a blank sheet of paper or an empty video screen, the reporter's challenge is the same: Fill it with something interesting, accurate and timely, and if possible, be wise, witty and erudite, and do it right now because deadline is almost here.

During his 26-year career at The Tribune, Bill Eaton faced that challenge thousands of times.

His writing fills 28 fat envelopes in The Tribune's library. He wrote about whatever he had to, because that is what a reporter on a metropolitan newspaper does for a living. But Mr. Eaton met the challenge by writing with wit, with feeling and with an honesty that revealed much about the man behind the byline.

Some of his best writing was contained in stories that many reporters would have considered too routine to expend much effort on. In November 1980, he was assigned to do a story on Veterans Day.

Sometimes in a quiet place inside his head, Ray Fanjul can again see his men toppling over in that sprawling, thudding fall peculiar to burdened men hit by fire from heavy weapons.

An old flier died in 1986 and Mr. Eaton wrote:

They sent Bob Love off forever in the afternoon and the fighters swept low across the field like that band of angels, the leader pulling up out of formation in tribute to the missing man.

From a profile of a mountain climber:

Kim Schmitz' eyes are the palest blue, and they've looked at the view from the roof of the world.

Mr. Eaton liked to end his stories with a kicker — a quote or a thought that would stay with the reader. The kickers were often a commentary on life. One year, writing about his brother, Mr. Eaton began by discussing Santa Claus and ended up like this:

Freud it was who told us our dreams are private myths, our myths public dreams.

If our rituals hold us together, our myths lend a little wonder,

Mr. Eaton was an inveterate observer of life, his profession and the people around him.

one star or another to follow, while we are going on.

Mr. Eaton was an inveterate observer of life, his profession and the people around him. Many of his unpublished observations appeared on short sheets of paper, sometimes accompanied by a cartoon. Some were signed "The Phantom," others had his byline. Some were kept in a file folder in his drawer, others on a large metal spike on his desk with a cartoon Phantom on top.

Mr. Eaton on his profession:

Let a good rewrite man have half an hour's solitude and he can give you 5,000 words on how many pinheads are dancing with the angels.

On being opinionated:

Some would say that subjectivity is a weakness. In my opinion it is a strength. If you don't feel it, don't fool with it.

On ecology:

I gave up on the space shuttle this week when I learned they're retesting the dumping of human effluent into space. I hope they get hit with some of the spatter.

Mr. Eaton loved airplanes and the people who flew them. In December 1963, the Air Force rolled out an elderly B-25, one of the last of a fleet of bombers that helped win the war with Japan. He wrote:

The old thing went rollicking past glistening jetliners, sleek jet fighters and bright painted private planes like a haughty old harridan who knew she had what it took in her heyday — and could still ruin a man if he erred.

It moved as Bette Davis might, making a third act entrance at the Little Theater in West Overshoe, Neb.

Mr. Eaton's other great love was his son, Billy. And despite all the odds, the numerous chances for a father and son to go different ways, the two loves

became one.

Billy Eaton was born on Oct. 16, 1962, and the new father promptly telegraphed the new grandfather: "Billy Eaton Jet Pilot Born Today."

Writing about his son — and about flying — a decade later, Mr. Eaton said:

It's just that flying is kid stuff, it truly is, and all the time I had thought so and said so and had the good luck at last to know it absolutely.

And so he lies on the hillside back of our house, with binoculars, examining the white contrails pouring across the blue, and knows the name of every piece of shining silver he sees, and has his own skyful, glued and painted, hung on strings above his bed.

Just a few months ago, Billy Eaton lived up to his dad's expectations and was awarded the wings of a flier at a ceremony on a dusty West Texas air base.

Mr. Eaton, who never shrank from mentioning God or expressing an opinion in print — when appropriate — described his journey this way:

The little towns stand on either side of the road in the sun and the dust and the wind; red brick storefronts and wood frame houses that outlive the men who made them; creeks and brooks already run dry now in spring, the land green where someone works it and no better than scrub where they don't; drinking water so hard even an atheist ought to be able to walk on it.

And meditating on what his son's graduation meant, Mr. Eaton wrote:

Leaving Texas we climbed through cloud to 37,000 feet before we broke out on top where it all lay before me once more, the endless, changing world aloft that shrinks a man and makes him mute, and having shown itself holds him always, so that he never really returns to earth.

I looked up at an Air Force C-141 pulling its white condensation trail, way up where the blue darkens in a high, cold silence.

I watched it and said goodbye to Billy.

*Mine no more.
Gone to the sky.*

The Tribune loses one of its best — Bill Eaton

TUE MAY 2 1989

By Barbara Lynne Harris
The Tribune

William Ward Eaton, Tribune reporter and union leader and one of the best writers the newspaper has ever employed, died yesterday in his San Francisco home.

He called to his wife, Kathryn Helm Regan, in the middle of the night and said, "I think I'm having a heart attack."

He was, and his heart gave out

before the paramedics reached him.

He was 59 years old.

Mr. Eaton was an intelligent and irreverent man; a talented and sensitive writer; a patient teacher; a cantankerous, cigar-smoking fixture in the City Room; and perhaps one of the funniest men alive.

He was an idealist who, with

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of its best

By Barbara Lynne
The Tribune

William W.
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wit and insight, saw the great potential of human beings and was always a little disappointed with the performance of the species as a whole.

Yet in 31 years of daily newspapering, he never lost his awe and admiration for human beings as individuals and he carefully, gently crafted profiles about their lives that showed them in their best and truest light.

"He was a very talented writer and had great sensitivity," said Roy Grimm, senior editor of The Tribune. "He didn't write about people as if they were things or objects and he never lost sight of the fact that he was writing about human beings with very real feelings."

Bill Eaton: One of the best old-style re-write men at The Tribune.

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By Matthew J. Lee/The Tribune

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Union official

Mr. Eaton was also a chairman of the Oakland Unit of the Newspaper Guild from 1973 to 1980, serving six terms and negotiating three contracts, which include workplace rules, wages and benefits that Tribune newsroom employees enjoy today.

He was born in September 1929 in the town of Gowanda, in New York, the home of his ancestors for nearly 100 years and to the place to which he dreamed of returning.

He grew up during the Depression, working in his father's furniture store, and graduated Gowanda High School in June 1946. He attended Brockport State Teachers College in Brockport, N.Y., and the University of Nevada-Reno, where he received a bachelor's degree in journalism in 1956.

In 1949, Mr. Eaton joined the U.S. Air Force and became a pilot, the culmination of a boyhood love of flying and fascination with the sky.

"Flying alone was something I wanted to do from the beginning of my remembered childhood when I stood in a meadow in Cattaraugus County, New York, to see an elderly biplane rocking along in the clover until it flew a dark cross going away into the blue leaving me," he wrote.

"When in manhood I soloed in an airplane, it was an act of faithfulness to memory. I held the machine close to the ground in the first moments of flight to gather speed, then pulled it up until my ears were filled with engine noise and my eyes saw only that blue. Alone up there I shouted."

"Because of his passion, he educated us all," said Robert C. Maynard, Tribune editor and president. "He inspired us to appreciate the genius and the courage of those who would venture into the air."

Mr. Eaton honed his writer's craft covering murders, robberies and accidents on the police beat at the Reno Evening Gazette.

"He was a great talent, great wisdom and great humor," said Roland Melton, columnist with the Reno Gazette Journal and the most senior member of the Gannett board of directors.

As a union leader in Reno, he led an unsuccessful strike in

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1959 that broke the union there. Afterward, he worked briefly at the Sacramento Union before coming to the Oakland Tribune in June 1961.

Enormous talent

He was young and confident, and there was no doubt about his enormous talent for writing, said former Tribune reporter Jeff Morgan.

"It quickly became apparent to us that he was one of the best writers the paper had ever employed. He was also funny, acerbic and a good friend," Morgan recalled.

Mr. Eaton became the "ring-leader" of the early morning re-write bank's dealings with "The Enemy, which in English is spelled City Desk." He began passing notes with cynical observations about news events and office politics, which were posted on the newsroom's bulletin board and signed "The Phantom."

Everyone at The Tribune knew Mr. Eaton was the Phantom and admired his strange poetry, ditties and odd bits of ersatz wisdom. One read: "We must all inevitably succumb to gravity, buckling at the knees, crumpling in a heap, while all around us the mountains wear down, the trees fall and become mulch, our great works become dust, so that in the end everything lands on its ass."

Mr. Eaton loved the fast re-write and a breaking news story and was one of the best, old-style re-write men left in The Tribune's newsroom.

Mentor to writers

He freely shared his skills with green reporters, watching them hit the pavement and come back with a fresh angle on an old story. He was a mentor to many of the staff's writers, watching their work progress, encouraging them and offering advice when he could.

"Exactly 20 years ago, about this time of year, when I went to work for the Oakland Trib in Martinez, my first day on the job there was a fairly sensational murder," said Fran Dauth, who now is national editor at the Philadelphia Inquirer. She sat down at the typewriter to write the story, aware that all eyes were on her, when Mr. Eaton introduced himself.

"I'm sure you'll do a good job but I've been here a long time, and I know what they want," he

said, handing her a step-by-step guide explaining how to write the story. "I was young and scared and he had never laid eyes on me before, and he came over and handed me this little guide . . . color in the lead, facts in the second graph, then come back with color in the third graph. That was the lead story in the paper the next day."

"First and foremost he was a story-teller," his daughter said. "A yarn-spinner and he had millions of them."

He shared them with readers: touching stories of little boys dying alone in hospital rooms and humorous stories about his brother's unflagging belief in Santa Claus and his mother's adventures with mangles and automobiles.

He recently shared with readers the story of his son, William Gordon Eaton, who earned his pilot's wings in the Air Force.

Among his proudest achievements was his work with the newspaper's union.

"He profoundly believed in the process of people collectively sticking up for themselves," said Doug Cuthbertson, executive director of the Northern California Newspaper Guild.

31 years in journalism

Though he spent 31 years in the business, he still loved coming to work, mainly for the people, but always for the work.

"The world is full of dull, boring jobs but this isn't one of them. I was raised to deny that work is fun but I learned better,"

he wrote in a brief, autobiographical blurb. "Everyone in this business talks about wanting to go back and take some more courses to be a better journalist, but a really good journalist is self-taught and he needs wit and character and integrity. (A journalism school, however, can be a great place to meet girls.) The people I think are the best in this game are always loners, and I know why that is so, and it's a secret."

Besides his wife, Mr. Eaton is survived by his daughters, Carolyn Judith Eaton of El Cerrito and Gail Frances Eaton of Davis; his son, Lt. William Gordon Eaton of the U.S. Air Force; and his mother, Frances Eaton and his brother, Robert J. Eaton, both of Charlotte, N.C.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

The family prefers donations to Project Open Hand, which feeds indigent AIDS victims. Staff writer Gene Ayres contributed to this report.